

Opinions differ as to the date the current drouth started in the shortgrass country. Moisture patterns vary so much during weather failures that pinpointing exact beginnings and endings are difficult. Down on Highway 67 between Mertzon and Barnhart, for example, four growing seasons have passed without as much as two inches of rain at one time. Up here at the ranch, dry calamity hasn't taken an intermission in 27 months or more.

Around the livestock circles, reports come of outfits that had 30 inches the first nine months of 1994. In drearier sessions, word comes of western ranches that have gone months without wetting both sides of the fence posts. San Angelo has had above-normal moisture for the year. But one lady said at the grocery store in Mertzon, she'd thrown her rain gauges away and measured her showers by the number of hours the dust stayed down in the corrals.

The distance of a few city blocks makes a difference on the courthouse hill at Mertzon. Within the same period in September, the A.S.C. committee meeting in the ag building declared Irion County a drouth disaster area and the commissioner's court across the way and the school board on the next hill raised property taxes.

Members on all the boards have agriculture backgrounds. Ranchers and farmers, however, nominate and elect the

committeemen, and the commissioners and school board members are elected by all the citizens of the county.

Big Foot Wallace, the famous frontiersman, fretted a lot whether a fullblood Comanche had more compassion for the whites than a halfblood. It's hard to tell where and when a worthy's bonds sever in office. State delegations undergo a big shock when native sons succeed and soon can't recall the first four numbers of their home zip code, much less the names of their old compadres.

Fall excitement in the ranch community was hard to follow. Calves and lambs dropped 35percent in price and weaning weights came to a standstill. Prices on the protein being fed 90 days ahead of the normal feeding season ranged within a few bucks a ton of the 1993 rates and a 60-pound bale of coastal bermuda hay could be snapped up at \$6.50 f.o.b. the feed store in San Angelo.

Bankers looked at 50 percent declines on \$800 a head mother cows. Directors and bank examiners, I feel sure, stood the jugkeepers up on their toes and had them spinning like whistling tops as the backing on lines of credit dissolved every cattle sale day.

I overheard a school board member tell a guest at Lion's Club last week that 90 percent of the district tax base was oil and gas production. The way those three or four barrel stripper wells kick out the dough at \$17.00 a barrel, the fossil fuel miners were probably ready to make a donation to the community whether taxes rose or not.

Major oil companies adjust their profits by hiring or firing employees. Independents, however, the mainstays of the industry, don't operate much different than herders.

I asked an independent operator not too long ago if he'd sell a string of pipe lying out on the ground at the ranch. He laughed and said that the old tubing was going to be a new flow line. Before I could ask to buy the old flow line, he told me it would be used around the battery to make cattleguards and fenceposts for future use. He offered to sell his junk pile, but he tipped his hand too far to make that worthwhile.

We are going to have to streamline our businesses to keep up in this age. Dry weather has already cut the stocking rates and trimmed the income.

There's still a lot of fluff left in the shoestring oil companies and small ranch operations. We all should think positive like the school district and the commissioner's court.